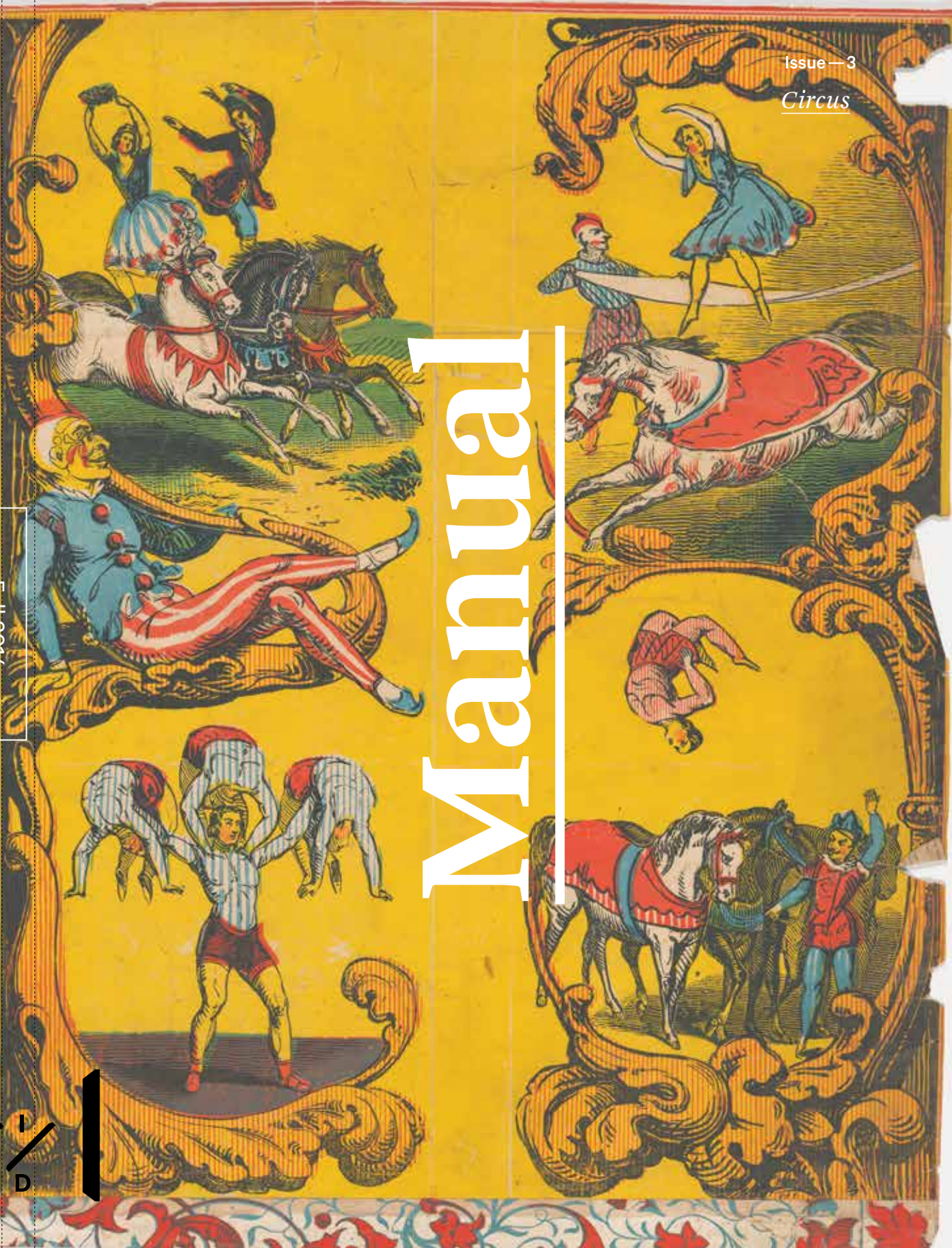


Issue — 3

Circus

Manual





Manual

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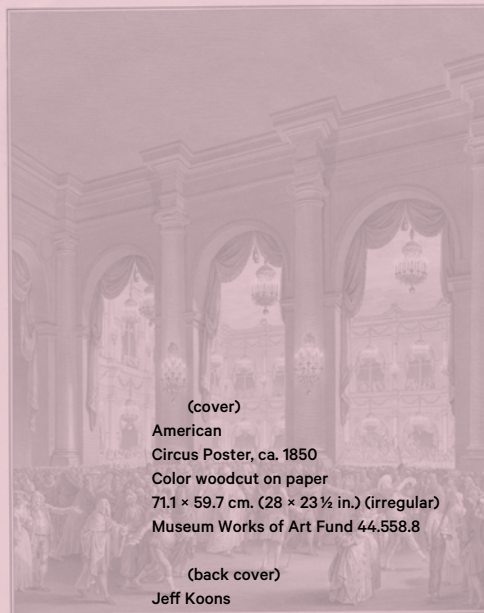
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Rhode Island School of Design

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(cover)

American
Circus Poster, ca. 1850
Color woodcut on paper
71.1 × 59.7 cm. (28 × 23 ½ in.) (irregular)
Museum Works of Art Fund 44.558.8

(back cover)

Jeff Koons
American, b. 1954
Balloon Dog (Red), 1995
Porcelain
26.7 × 26.7 × 12.7 cm. (10 ½ × 10 ½ × 5 in.)
Gift of Susan Morris 2008.101.1
© Jeff Koons

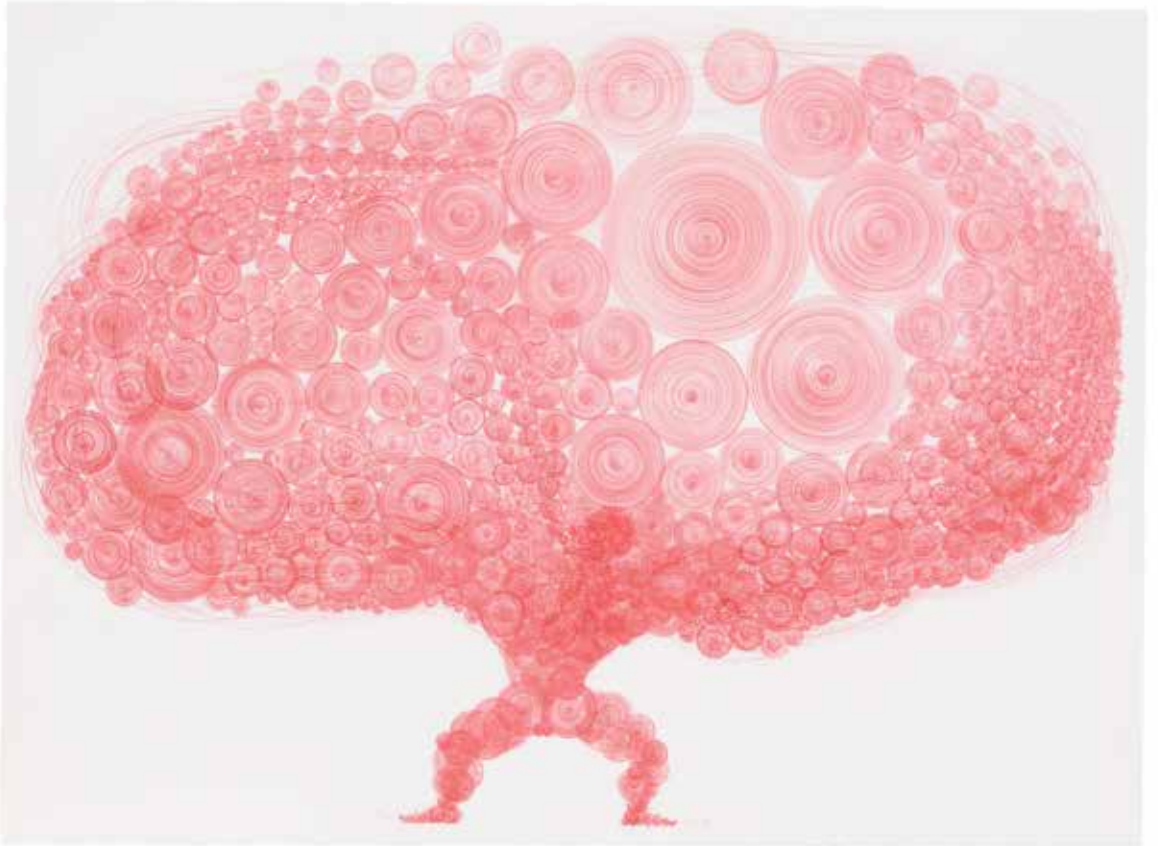
(end papers)

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Gaming Piece, 1st century CE–2nd century CE
Bone
Diameter: 3.2 cm. (1 ¼ in.)
Georgianna Sayles Aldrich Fund 1996.14

French
Textile Swatch, 1850–1899
Cotton plain weave, printed
Length: 16.5 cm. (6 ½ in.)
Museum Works of Art Fund 52.320

Jean-Michel Moreau le jeune, printmaker
French, 1741–1814
After Pierre Louis Moreau-Desproux, designer
French, 1727–1793
The Masked Ball (Le Bal Masqué), 1782
Etching and engraving on paper
Plate: 52.6 × 39.9 cm. (20 11/16 × 15 11/16 in.)
Gift of Murray S. Danforth, Jr. 50.313

Etruscan
Acrobat (probably the handle of a cista lid),
4th century BCE–3rd century BCE
Bronze
8.3 × 3.5 cm. (3 3/16 × 1 3/8 in.)
Gift of Mrs. Celia Robinson Stillwell 85.107.1



Gina Borromeo is the curator of ancient art at the RISD Museum, where her most recent project was the reinstallation of the Egyptian collection. Her research interests include ancient sculpture, museology, and cultural property.

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Jim Drain (RISD BFA 1998, Sculpture) was a member of Forcefield, a Providence-based group that merged music, performance, film, and installation. His subsequent solo work has been widely collected and exhibited.

Daniel Heyman (RISD faculty, Printmaking) has taught and lectured extensively. His prints and paintings, shown widely, are in public collections including the RISD Museum, the Hood Museum at Dartmouth College, and the Baltimore Museum of Art.

Andrew Martinez is the archivist for the Rhode Island School of Design and the RISD Museum. He co-edited the anthology *Infinite Radius: Founding Rhode Island School of Design*.

Ellen McBreen is an assistant professor of art history at Wheaton College (Massachusetts), where she teaches courses on modern and contemporary art. She is also an independent curator and the author of *Matisse's Sculpture: The Pinup and the Primitive*, Yale University Press, 2014.

Thangam Ravindranathan is an associate professor of French studies at Brown University. Her teaching and research interests include the contemporary novel and the question of the animal in French literature and critical theory.

Rebecca Schneider is a professor of theatre arts and performance studies at Brown University. She is the author of numerous books and essays, among them *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (2011) and *Theatre & History* (2014).

Susan Smulyan, a professor of American studies at Brown University, serves as the director of the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage.

Gwen Strahle is an assistant professor of foundation studies at RISD and a past recipient of the school's John R. Frazier Award for Excellence in Teaching. She resides and paints in Connecticut.

Do-Ho Suh
South Korean, b. 1962
Karma Juggler, 2004
From the Exit Art portfolio *Six by Four*, 2004
Inkjet print on Somerset Satin paper
Image/sheet: 76 × 56 cm. (29 15/16 × 22 1/16 in.)
Gift of Exit Art 2012.133.7.6
© Do Ho Suh, Courtesy of the Artist and Lehmann
Maupin Gallery, New York and Hong Kong

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Circus

Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, welcome to a show unlike any other.

How can a circus be held in print? you may ask. Indeed, prepare to be astounded. Here you'll find tumbling acrobats, unsettling sideshows, ferocious beasts, fantastical costumes, entrancing feats of grace and strength. It's all contained within these pages, we assure you, but perhaps not in ways you would expect.

We have sought to explode the very nature of the *circus*, a word from the Latin meaning both the circle and the Roman amphitheater, that ancient site of chariot races, military reenactments, and the like. Today, of course, *circus* has different associations, associations that are—just as the advertisements promise—extraordinary. But this comes with a warning, for just as the striped circular tent offers up the remarkable, it can also present the complicated and cruel. There is always a dark side, isn't there, ladies and gentlemen?

The invitation is this: step up and let the spectacle unfold before you. Gaze in astonishment on the present and the past. Encounter daring beauty and surprising oddity, things you have never seen before, and from these—the shocking, the marvelous, the exquisite—make your own associations.

And so, without further ado, we present: *Circus*.

Columns

From the [Files](#) pries open the archive, [Double Take](#) looks at one object two different ways, [Artist on Art](#) offers a creative response by an invited artist, [Object Lesson](#) exposes the stories behind objects, [Portfolio](#) presents a series of objects on a theme, [How To](#) explores the making of an object

From the Files

Fall 2014

Manual



Photographs: Le Bal Masqué,
Take-a-Break Weekend, 1952.
Photo by Ed Howell.

RISD students in costume,
ca. 1980s.

Rhode Island School of Design
Archives.

"This is the country where cannibals dance with prostitutes, the poets argue with men from Mars... where inanimate objects arise with joy." This is how the 1952 Le Bal Masqué was described in *Portfolio*, the student yearbook. The theme that year was *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the setting was New Orleans, and the point was "for people to be anything that they are not." The photo captures a student dressed as the left half of Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror* dancing with



a harlequin, the popular stock character from the Italian *commedia dell'arte*. Le Bal was just one element of postwar Take-a-Break Weekends, celebrated in February by RISD students as an escape from the tedium of both school and winter. The weekend also included a formal dance, a music concert, and a student talent show.

Dating back to its beginning, RISD has a long history of costume balls, masquerades, and pageants produced by its students, faculty, and patrons. In February 1875, the Women's Centennial Committee of Rhode Island—the group who with the remaining funds it raised for the 1876 Philadelphia International Exhibition established the Rhode Island School of Design in 1877—hosted a Martha Washington Tea Party. About 200 women and their escorts dressed in an “array of rich brocades and velvets, the Martha Washington kerchiefs and frills of nicest lace, combined with the powdered hair, mob caps, and even the high-heeled shoes with buckles... such that intimate friends would not know each other until some peculiarity of voice, manner, or motion revealed the individual.”

Fancy dress balls and pageants were especially important annual events at RISD during the first three decades of the twentieth century. The invitation for the 1905 ball encouraged participants to “wear costumes representing flowers or suggestive of a garden, as trees, birds, insects, or vegetables.” Guests at a 1908 ball were instructed to dress as “Indians, the early Spanish, Dutch, English and French Colonists or the modern immigrants, the militia of any period, historical personages, or any other characters who have helped in the making of America.” Student-produced pageants centered around themes such as Arabian Nights, Medieval Masque (with “grotesque costume of the diseases” including cholera, dropsy, gout, and jaundice), and Pirate Party.

The image from the 1980s shows a variety of characters—including Snidely Whiplash, the villain from Dudley Do-Right animated cartoons (far left), and Bill the Cat, the unfortunate feline from the *Bloom County* comic strip (far right)—on stage in a tent, perhaps being judged for best costume at a student ball or festival.

Andrew Martinez

Double

Gwen Strahle /
Thangam
Ravindranathan

Take

Fall 2014

Gwen Strahle: Decisive mark-making, executed with speed and confidence, brings order to this chaotic scene. Varied pressures of the dark values emphasize the drama, and strong diagonals hold the layers of the fleeing crowd while the swooping lines of the tent provide an exit out of the top of the drawing. There is, of course, a sense of instability to the narrative, but Edy-Legrand maintains control by building a structured and expressive visual armature.

In the very center stands what appears to be a tamer, an anchor within the turbulence. The lion roars behind the flat front of the cage, but it seems unlikely that it will get past the tamer. This is a drawing inside of the drawing: if you tip it vertically, it would mimic the scale and movement of the whole drawing.

Everything is blurry and in motion, facilitating—almost peripherally—the experience of confusion. The darks, however, bring an abstract order, and the floor provides a more solid base to the drawing, from which everything jumps. Everything on the edge of the paper wants to exit. The paper contains the drawing in the way that the cage contains the lion, yet all containments are threatening to be broken.

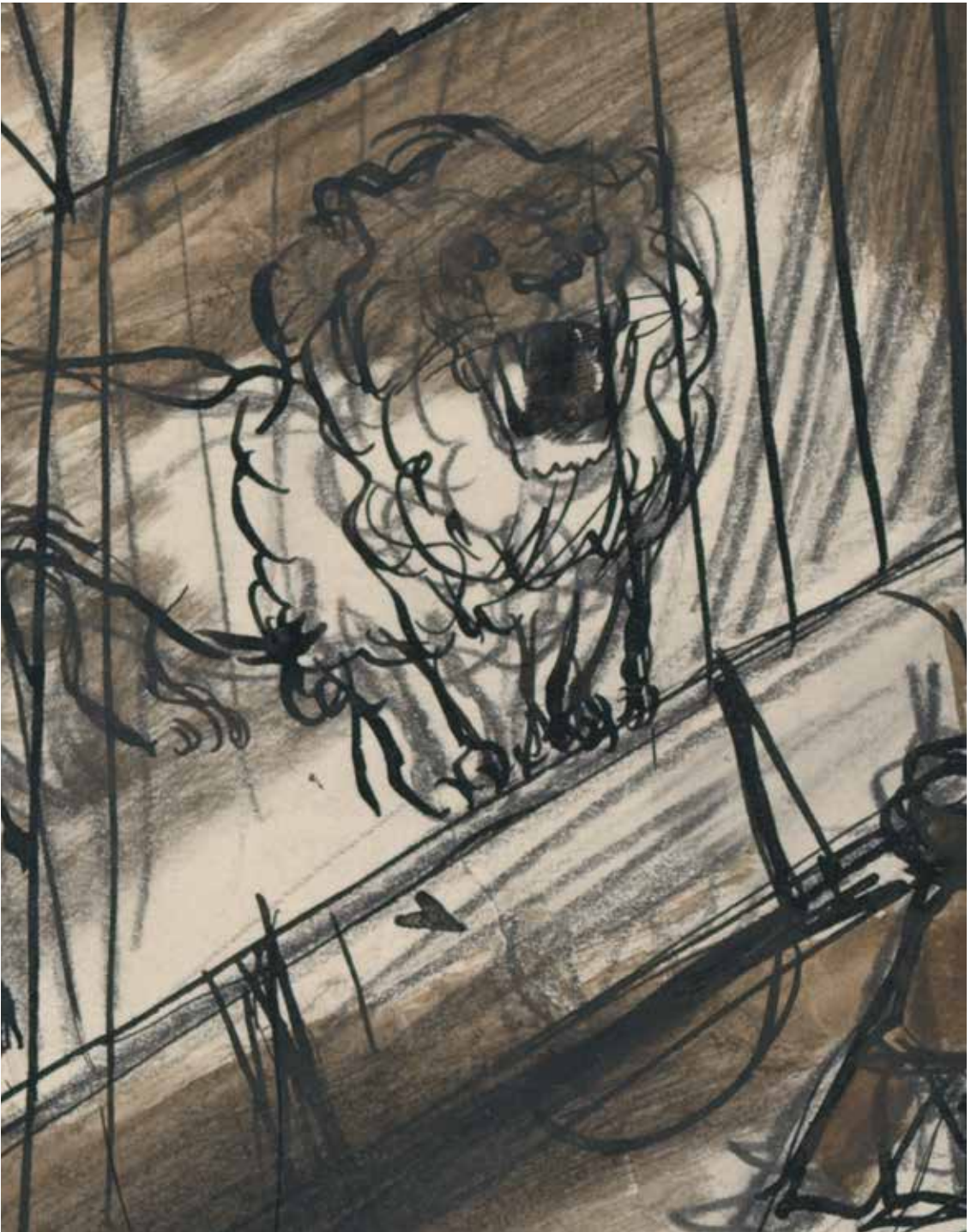
What does the dark cloud behind the tamer and lion represent? Is it nighttime, a depth, or an explosion's smoke? Perhaps it is the sound of the lion's roar. Is it also there to cover a previous drawing? There does appear to be a seated figure in the shadow.

The undulating marks create movement and also sound, as though the lion's roar has caused the artist's hand to shake. This lion is having a good time celebrating his role as a star of the circus. He is not particularly interested in leaving his cage, just in creating the havoc that has prompted this drawing.

Does the drawing really scare? No. It is too whimsical and cartoony. Humor is an intended part of the mix.

Manual





Edouard Léon Louis Edy-Legrand
 French, 1892–1970
Crowd at the Circus (detail), ca. 1930
 Ink and pencil on paper
 Sheet: 32.9 × 25.1 cm. (12 ¹⁵/₁₆ × 9 ⁷/₈ in.)
 Gift of the Fazzano Brothers 84.198.1205
 © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS),
 New York / ADAGP, Paris

Take Double

Thangam
 Ravindranathan /
 Gwen Strahle

Thangam Ravindranathan: Edy-Legrand's *Crowd at the Circus* is one of several preparatory drawings for a 1930 illustrated edition of Alphonse Daudet's *Tartarin of Tarascon* (1872). This popular novel featured a portly, middle-aged, mustachioed bourgeois who, never having left his native town of Tarascon in Provence but long steeped in reveries of intrepid adventures in faraway lands, is catapulted into setting off for North Africa in not-so-hot pursuit of lions. In the fateful scene depicted here, Tartarin beholds, for the first time, in a traveling menagerie, "a magnificent lion from the Atlas mountains."

Before the lion's cage, our hero stands "erect, with his hamstrings in tension, and his arms folded on his gun barrel." The beast, "a gigantic specimen" with a "brutish mien," suddenly lets out a fearsome roar. While the crowd yells in terror and makes to flee, Tartarin alone stands perfectly still. He has found at last his formidable match. Portraying Tartarin from the back, Edy-Legrand makes his face the turned-away center of the scene. We see neither the "lightning in his eyes" recorded by Daudet nor "that gruesome grin with which all the town was familiar." To see Tartarin's face, one would have to be the lion. (An optical embarrassment which is also a historical-cultural-philosophical one: to occupy that viewpoint is to stand inside a cage. Besides, when has a lion ever been a reliable witness to the fearlessness drawn on a human face?) The composition's angle is odd and the safe distance it offers is tense, even taunting. We are transfixed by that figure in the center (made

larger and more decisive in the final illustration) who alone is mighty enough to look the beast in the eye—or self-possessed enough to remember there are bars on the cage.

Tartarin would slay no ferocious lions in Algeria; indeed this picaresque hero, Daudet's tribute to Cervantes (whose *Don Quixote*, it so happens, Edy-Legrand was also illustrating around 1930), has become an emblem of swashbuckling bravado without an object. For the philosopher Michel Foucault, *Don Quixote* (1605) had inaugurated nothing less than literary modernity, where representations would be severed from the world (windmills mistaken for giants; life for a glorious epic). *Tartarin* in turn would ride the gap between exalted notions and reality, only the jest is sobered by an unprocessed casualty—here embodied in a roaring caged lion. No *Moby Dick*, this is a captive remnant of a species whose representations through the centuries (in circuses, menageries, literature, visual arts) had outpaced the thing itself. Already scarce in North Africa by the 1870s, the Atlas or Barbary lion (*Panthera leo leo*) had by the 1940s been hunted to extinction.

Art and philosophy today are haunted by the vanishing of animals. My interest in Edy-Legrand's drawing is in how expressively it *splits* the portrait of the novel's single wild lion between the crowd's wide-eyed terror and Tartarin's quiet admiration. Both attitudes respond to an exhausted illusion. Unknowingly prophetic, the scene delivers the beast to its ghostly fate.

Roman
Gaming piece,
1st century CE–2nd century CE
Bone
Diameter: 3.2 cm. (1¹/₁₆ in.)
Georgianna Sayles Aldrich Fund 1996.14

Rebecca Schneider /
Gina Borrromeo

Double

Take

Fall 2014

Manual

Rebecca Schneider: Resplendent on the face of this small bone disk is the unmistakable visage of a person—an actor—wearing a theater mask. In profile, the actor behind the mask looks off to the side. Through the classical downturn of the mask’s large and open mouth, a small, boney tongue still flickers. What the actor might be saying, and the mask might be seeing, is anyone’s guess.

Curator Gina Borrromeo hands this object to me in a small box, together with the nitrile gloves I can wear to touch it. We take the token out and discuss it, passing it back and forth between us. It strikes me that one historical thing we can know about this object is clearly still true: it sits perfectly in the palm of a hand today, just as it would have in the first century BCE. Then, as now, it can easily pass—hand to hand—like a coin. Even through the thin layer of industrial modernity, I feel its currency. It is made to pass.

We don’t really know what this object actually was, said my host, but it was not a coin. It may have been a “theater ticket” as classical theater historian Margarete Bieber would have it (1961, 247). Other historians, like Elisabeth Alföldi-Rosenbaum, would see it as a “game token” used either on a portable game board or on a mosaic version fixed in place, having, thus, “no relationship to the theatre” (cited in Spielman 2012, 21).

No relationship to theater? The tiny actor’s masked face suggests otherwise. Something of ancient theater persists in the object, even if it was

not used in the theaters themselves or exchanged like tickets or coins. For, of course, something of gaming and circulation belongs as much to theater as it does to coinage (Wise 2000, 181). Upstairs in the RISD Museum, a coin from Naxos winks at me from behind a glass case. Dionysus, the god of theater, is on one side, his chief satyr, Silenus, on the other.

At the very least, the small bone token invites us to recalibrate our contemporary understanding of theater and art to a more ancient worldview, when the two were not as distinct as we sometimes imagine high art and popular sport to be today. The great theater festivals in Greece were, after all, competitions. In the vibrant world of variety entertainment in Rome, competition for favor from audiences could reach fevered peaks. And as Renaissance historian Stephen Greenblatt has written, wherever theatrical spectacle flourishes one can find the “circulation of social energy” that also motivates economic exchange—the passing of coins from hand to hand.

As we passed the coin-like token between us, in an age when plastic may soon make coins obsolete, we wondered: what kind of game might have used the visage of an actor as a surrogate or a mask or a stand-in—like the tiny shoe on a Monopoly board—for a player? Circulating through the Roman Empire on a bit of bone, something of ancient theater persists, to be put again in play—this time in the museum, as, indeed, “art.”





1 Michael Padgett, in Christine Kondoleon, ed. *Antioch: The Lost Ancient City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), cat. nos. 46–48, 161–62; Margarete Bieber, *The History of the Greek and Roman Theater* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 71, 186, with earlier bibliography.

2 Wilhelm Fröhner, "Le Comput digital," *Annuaire de la Société française de numismatique et d'archéologie* 8 (1884): 232–38; Christian Hülsen, "Miscellanea Epigraphica," *Mitteilungen des Kaiserlich-Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Römische Abteilung* 11 (1896): 227–57.

3 Michael Rostovtseff, "Interprétation des tessères en os," *Revue archéologique* 5 (1905): 110–24. Elisabeth Alföldi, "The Muses on Roman Game Counters," *Muse* 9 (1975): 13–20; Elisabeth Alföldi-Rosenbaum, "The Finger Calculus in Antiquity and in the Middle Ages: Studies on Roman Game Counters I," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 5 (1971): 1–9, pls. 1–8.

4 Nicholas Purcell, "Literate Games: Roman Urban Society and the Game of Alea," *Past & Present* 147 (May 1995): 3–37; Anita Rieche, "Board Games and Their Symbols from Roman Times to Early Christianity," in I. L. Finkel, ed., *Ancient Board Games in Perspective* (London: British Museum Press, 2007), 87–89.

Roman
Gaming piece (verso),
 1st century CE–2nd century CE
 Bone
 Diameter: 3.2 cm. (1³/₁₆ in.)
 Georgianna Sayles Aldrich Fund 1996.14

Take Double

Gina Borrromeo /
 Rebecca Schneider

Gina Borrromeo: For a curator, almost nothing is more compelling than examining an object to gain insight into the past. How do curators do this? First, we look carefully at the object itself, in this case a small disk made of bone. Carved on one side (obverse) is a profile head of a man wearing a wreath and a tragic theater mask; the reverse side is plain. The edges are worn, and chipped in areas; it had clearly been used. Traces of soil remain in tiny pits marring the surface, and stains made by plant roots are visible on the reverse. These marks indicate that the disk was unearthed, although its original archaeological context is lost to us.

Curators compare an object lacking context with similar pieces. Carved bone disks were once believed to be entrance tickets to theatrical or gladiatorial performances, with images and inscriptions

designating seating sections.¹ It is unlikely, however, that tickets issued in the hundreds, if not thousands, would have been intricately carved of bone, a material not easily worked. Scholars later proposed that these were gaming pieces or game counters,² which was confirmed by the discovery of fifteen carved-bone disks in a child's tomb in Kerch, Ukraine.³

We also learn about objects through what was written about them. Ancient literary sources tell us that Romans enjoyed board games. Although game playing and associated betting were traditionally linked with the elite and their notions of leisure, both were eagerly adopted by Romans of all socioeconomic backgrounds. On festival days, the legal ban on gambling was lifted and bets were placed on the results of board games and circus races.⁴ One game board reads, "The game board is a circus: retire when you're beaten: you don't know how to play!"⁵

Romans typically played board games in taverns and their homes,⁶ although excavations indicate they were also incised onto marble slabs, pavements, theater seats, and temple steps. More elaborate mosaic examples were installed in baths, along roads, and even in cemeteries.⁷

Ancient bone disks might be analogous to today's playing cards, as versatile tools around which a number of games could be developed, with or without a board. Until other complete sets of gaming pieces are found—preferably with a board—this ambiguity and its ensuing speculation will remain.

⁵ Ibid., 24–25.

⁶ Rieche, "Board Games and Their Symbols from Roman Times to Early Christianity," 82.

⁷ Nicholas Purcell, "Inscribed Roman Gaming-Boards," in Finkel, ed., 2007, 90–97; R. C. Bell, "Notes on Pavement Games of Greece and Rome," in Finkel, ed., 2007, 98–99.

American
Circus Poster (verso & recto), 1850–1855
Four-part color woodcut on paper
Overall dimensions: 85 × 269.4 cm.
(33½ × 106⅞ in.)
Museum Works of Art Fund 44.558.3–6

Double

Susan Smulyan /
Daniel Heyman

Take

Susan Smulyan: Circus posters represent the beginnings both of national advertising and commercialized popular entertainment. This poster, a woodcut, publicizes a very early circus, one that traveled by horse-drawn carriages and boasted a canvas tent, a technology that made the circus portable. When circuses started to tour, new organizational structures (themselves a form of technology) evolved to ensure that the performers, animals, technicians, and equipment arrived at the same time, and that the audience knew they were coming. Advance men moved ahead of the circus to put up large posters on the sides of barns, changing the landscape into a very early advertising medium.

Fifty years later, circuses travelled the inter-continental rail system, and their size and complexity brought the first large entertainment businesses into existence. With a shift in printing technology from woodcuts to lithographs, posters were printed faster, cheaper, and in greater numbers. By the mid-1890s, the Barnum and Bailey Circus spent \$128,000 a year for posters, hanging up to 5,000 lithographs in each locality.¹ Circuses realized a national (and international) audience and became a model for national advertising.

Circuses reached the new national market by organizing their activities into a sustained effort—in military talk, a campaign. The first advertising agencies borrowed the idea of the campaign to establish the field of marketing. The organization required for advance men to hang circus posters was similar to that required of national-brand distributors placing new mass-produced products, from packaged crackers to bottled soda, in small-town general stores.

This poster's image is an advertisement of an advertisement. Parades were a form of advertising, displaying the circus to a prospective audience as wagons carrying the performers and animals made their way

down the main street or moved from the railway station to the circus tent. The poster, the next stage of representation, here pictures this earlier form of advertising.

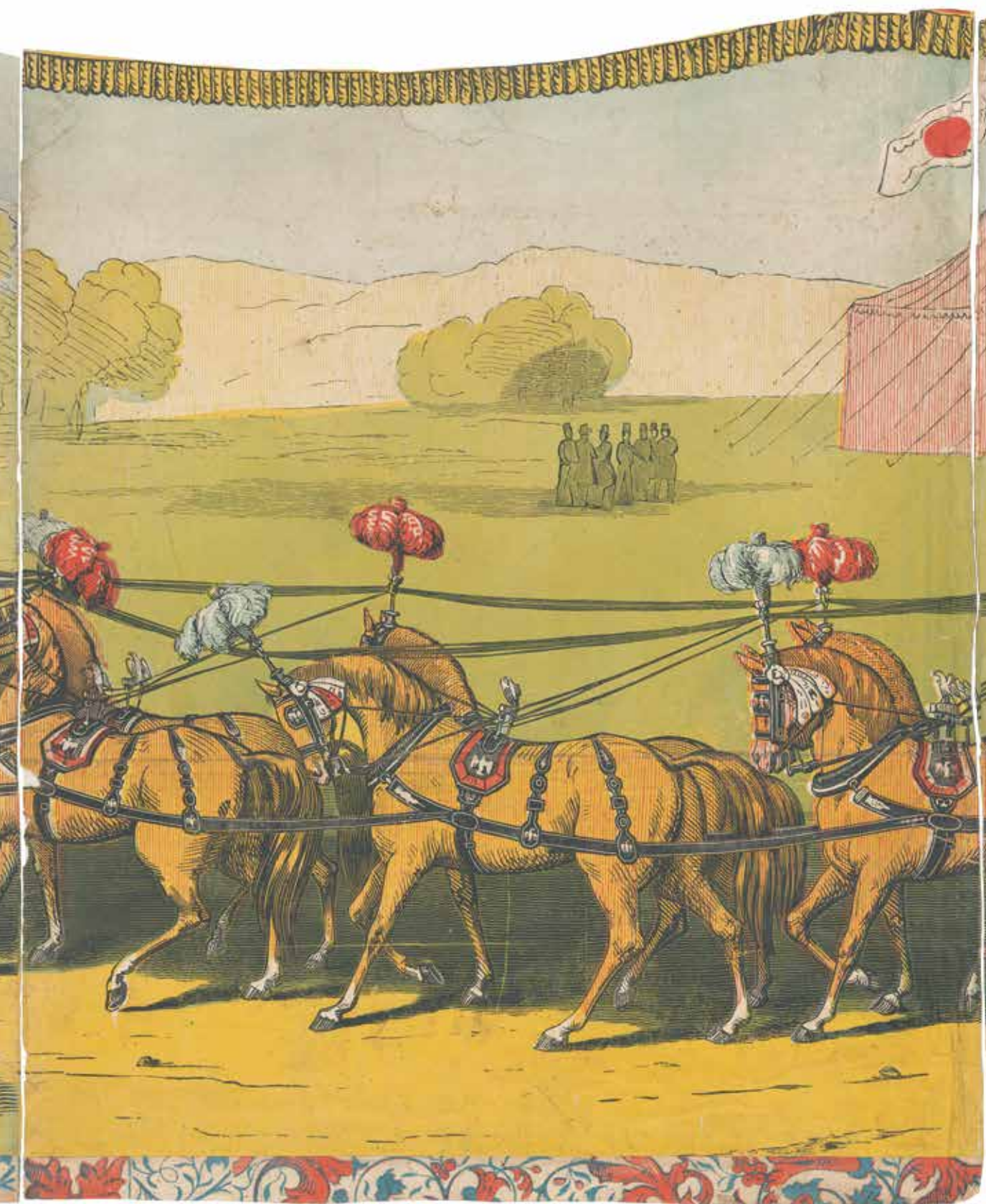
The image shows middle-class men, women, and children watching the arrival of the circus. This version of the circus exists in a pastoral landscape and works hard to overcome any wariness regarding circus performers. National product-brand advertising has always presented consumers and consumption as wholesome and family-based. The poster also illustrates the early use of another familiar advertising technique: portraying the product as magical. Here the winged horses of the carriage transform into real horses that do the work of pulling the wagon. Contemporary advertisements often show magical transformations of products into a fantasy landscape and back again.

The circus poster showed that successful advertisements needed to be both easily replicable and widely appealing. First mass-produced as woodcuts and then as lithographs, they became the first broadly available advertising images. Circuses presented the same show across the country, attracting diverse audiences. And entertainment producers and product advertisers, building on what they had learned from circuses and circus posters, also learned how to appeal to these new national audiences.

With the help of the students in Transnational Popular Culture, a graduate seminar in American Studies at Brown University: Felicia Bevel, Kangzhi Chen, Emily Contois, Kate Duffy, Elizabeth Gray, Haruko Hashimoto, Sage Snider, Bo Sun, Yen Tran, Yeng Zheng.

¹ Janet M. Davis. *The Circus Age: Culture and Society Under the American Big Top*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002: 44–5.







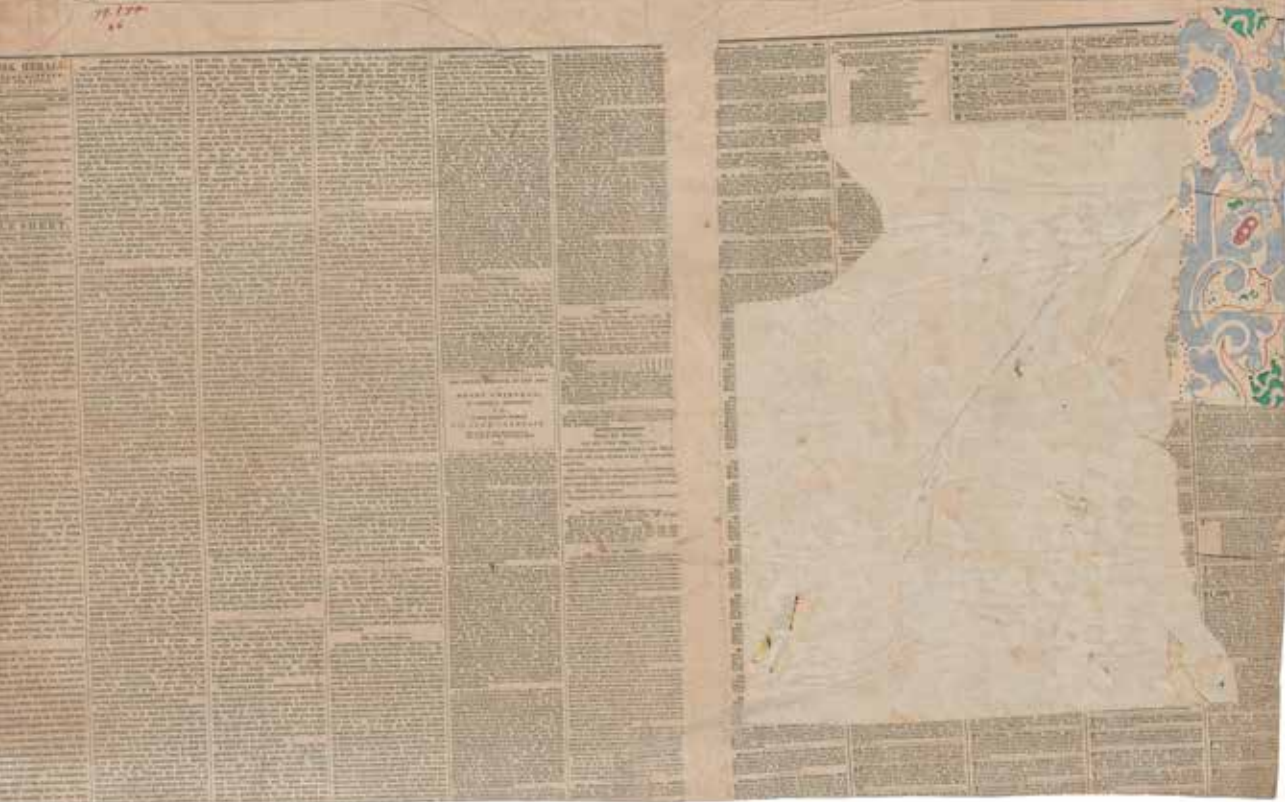








THE NEW YORK HERALD.



American
Circus Poster (recto & verso), 1850–1855
Four-part color woodcut on paper
Overall dimensions: 85 × 269.4 cm.
(33 ½ × 106 ⅞ in.)
Museum Works of Art Fund 44.558.3–6

Take

Daniel Heyman /
Susan Smulyan

There are many ways to look at an artwork, and depending on which method you choose, many windows that work can open. I have no immediate interest in this poster. Hand-printed, colorful, and joyous, it borrows motifs from a long history of images of European court spectacle, perhaps indicating something about the origins of the traveling circus in the first place. When the work is turned over, however, a true curiosity grows in me.

As a printer trained in Japanese relief, I know the back of a work often tells more about how the image was made than the front does. Artists and caretakers can leave all sorts of clues there. At some point—perhaps because the print was considered fragile—someone backed the printed pages by gluing on sheets of newspaper. One sheet is marked “Morning Edition, Saturday November [illegible], 1851.”

Consider the following:

The Prince de Joinville had recommended the withdrawal of his name as a candidate for the Presidency of the French republic. This he is said to have done from a fear that his private interests might be the occasion of discord amongst “the party of order” at a time when it is necessary for that party to be united, if they are to defeat Louis Napoleon in his last move.

Or this:

“Women Allowed to Vote in Canada” – A Canadian correspondent of the New York Tribune, writing from Toronto, says: “It may be interesting to the advocates of ‘women’s rights,’ to know that we have admitted women to some of the franchises, the withholding of which was greatly complained of at the Worcester Convention. The other day, at the election of school trustees, several women voted, their right to do so having been legalized at the last session of the Provincial Parliament.”

Here in the humble remnants of daily news sheets are the makings of a society’s diaristic account of its daily life—a Proustian madeleine that lifts small sections of the veil of our collective amnesia. The

back side is full of a past come to life through its run-ons of newsy announcements of ships coming to port and princely opinions, mirroring our incomplete understanding of our own time and allowing us to come to new understandings of both eras.

Here is an announcement from 1851 of women being allowed for the first time to vote in Toronto, not in an important government election, but in a school-board election, showing us in a clear and quotidian way one of the small victories that took us from a time of complete disenfranchisement to a time when the vote for women is taken for granted. Another announcement says the Honorable Robert J. Walker has been nominated for president of the United States. Reading this completely unfamiliar name, I am reminded how many people and propositions do not make it into the larger history, yet in their way affected the progress of that history and the resulting society in which we live. The references to the loading and unloading of cargo ships in Providence, Baltimore, and Bath sound quaint to us, even though global shipping enables our own contemporary society. No such notices now appear in the online editions of these same newspapers.

The back of this poster is full of interest to me. Its fresh and earnest reports spur me to dream about life circa 1851 as I wonder how odd and quaint my own time might seem to some future observer, and how what I strive so hard to make—prints with images from my days on earth—might be most interesting in the future for the little-noticed material I used to back them.



Otherness on Display

in Max Beckmann's *Annual Fair*

Alison W. Chang

In 1921, the German artist Max Beckmann (1884–1950) began work on a print portfolio entitled *Annual Fair* (Jahrmarkt). He had found success early in his career, gaining a reputation as one of Germany's most important young painters, working in a manner heavily influenced by the Impressionists. In 1914, at the onset of World War I, Beckmann volunteered for the German medical corps and was discharged for health reasons the following year. His wartime experiences were traumatic, precipitating a dramatic shift in style in which he began to reject traditional depictions of space and proportion, creating crowded, vertiginous pictorial spaces. The theater, carnival, and circus became increasingly important settings for his imagery, functioning as a metaphor for the folly and chaos of life.

FIG. 1

Max Beckmann
 German, 1884–1950
Negro Dance (detail)
 From the portfolio *Annual Fair* (Jahrmarkt), 1922
 Etching and drypoint on paper
 Sheet: 53 × 38.1 cm. (20 7/8 × 15 in.)
 Museum Works of Art Fund 53.117.9
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FIG. 2

Max Beckmann
 German, 1884–1950
The Barker
 From the portfolio *Annual Fair* (Jahrmarkt), 1922
 Etching and drypoint on paper
 Sheet: 53 × 38.1 cm. (20 3/4 × 15 in.)
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Many scholars view the *Annual Fair* portfolio as highly autobiographical by the identification of the artist's first wife, Minna Beckmann-Tube, whose signature topknot hairstyle places her in the role of the tightrope walker, the shooting-gallery proprietress, a rider on the carousel, and one of the performers resting backstage in *Behind the Scenes*. Beckmann himself has referred to the hooded figure on the tightrope with his wife as a self-portrait, which adds further support for this interpretation of the series.¹ However, most scholars who examine *Jahrmarkt* overlook *Negro Dance* and *The Negro*, the two works that most heavily complicate such readings.²

The term *jahrmarkt* refers to a carnival or fair, often held in an outdoor public space during Carnival, the period before Lent. Many of these fairs featured jugglers, acrobats, and street performers like those depicted in the ten prints in the portfolio. A frequent visitor to Zirkus Busch in Berlin and Cirque Medrano in Paris,³ Beckmann clearly found appeal in the circus.⁴ The artist's representations of circus and carnival attractions were not limited to the *Annual Fair* portfolio; his first foray into such imagery was as early as 1912, with a lithograph entitled *Carnival Stall* (Jahrmarktbude) which shows a clown and a horn player from behind, similar to the point of view Beckmann would later employ in *The Tall Man*, a print from *Annual Fair*. The completion of the large-scale canvas *Carnival* (Fastnacht) in 1920 marked the beginning of a series of circus-themed works that reached its zenith between 1920 and 1925 but continued well into the 1940s.

Annual Fair begins with a self-portrait: Beckmann sits before a sign that reads Circus Beckm[ann], casting himself in the role of circus proprietor [Fig. 2]. As he rings a bell with one hand, he gestures to his left, beckoning the viewer to enter. The following two prints give the viewer a glimpse backstage; in *Dressing Room* (Garderobe), two performers in a cramped dressing area apply makeup, while in *Behind the Curtains* (Hinter den Kulissen), costumed performers sit and

chat while several others play instruments. The remainder of the prints features sights typically found at a fair or carnival: a young woman with a rifle stands inside a shooting gallery, inviting the viewer to hit a bull's-eye; a sideshow act features a "tall" man being gawked at by a curious audience; a carousel is filled with whirling carousel animals and riders; a pair of tightrope walkers balances precariously above a net; and a serpent coils around the neck of a female snake charmer. Two images, however, are sights that are likely unfamiliar to contemporary audiences: both *The Negro* (Der Neger) and *Negro Dance* (Niggertanz) depict people of African origin on display, a common attraction at fairs and circuses in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In *The Negro* [Fig. 3], two Africans stand in front of a circus tent, flanked by a horn-toting clown. The clown rests his elbow along a railing and thrusts his hand in front of the African man facing the viewer, creating a physical barrier between the performers and the viewer. Ethnographic exhibitions were often situated in fenced-in areas to create a clear division between the viewers and those on display. In an attempt to establish a level of authenticity, performers were frequently placed in an environment that contained architectural forms that mimicked those found in their homeland. The boundary between performers and spectators was assiduously maintained, creating a clear line between the "civilized" visitors and the "primitive" natives, a division between "us" and "them."⁵ The clown, perhaps, reinforces this barrier between the performer and the viewer. His pointed finger, which mirrors Beckmann's gesture in the first print, encourages the viewer to continue through the circus, as well as the portfolio.

The practice of the display of foreign peoples can be traced as far back as ancient Egypt, when human conquests were paraded through the streets as a form of reinforcing the Egyptians' dominance over their enemies.⁶ The rise of the ethnographic exhibition in the nineteenth century coincided with the colonization of areas of Africa and Asia, and functioned as a method of consolidating national identity. In addition to their presence at carnivals and circuses, ethnographic exhibitions were a common feature at world's fairs, where they served to imply the superiority of the white race. These exhibits often included examples of architecture, weapons, tools, handicrafts, and clothing, all of which would be considered "primitive," especially in comparison to the rapidly industrializing European and American cities to which these exhibitions

FIG. 3

Max Beckmann

German, 1884–1950

*The Negro*From the portfolio *Annual Fair (Jahrmarkt)*, 1922

Etching and drypoint on paper

Sheet: 53 × 38.1 cm. (20 7/8 × 15 in.)

Museum Works of Art Fund 53.117.6

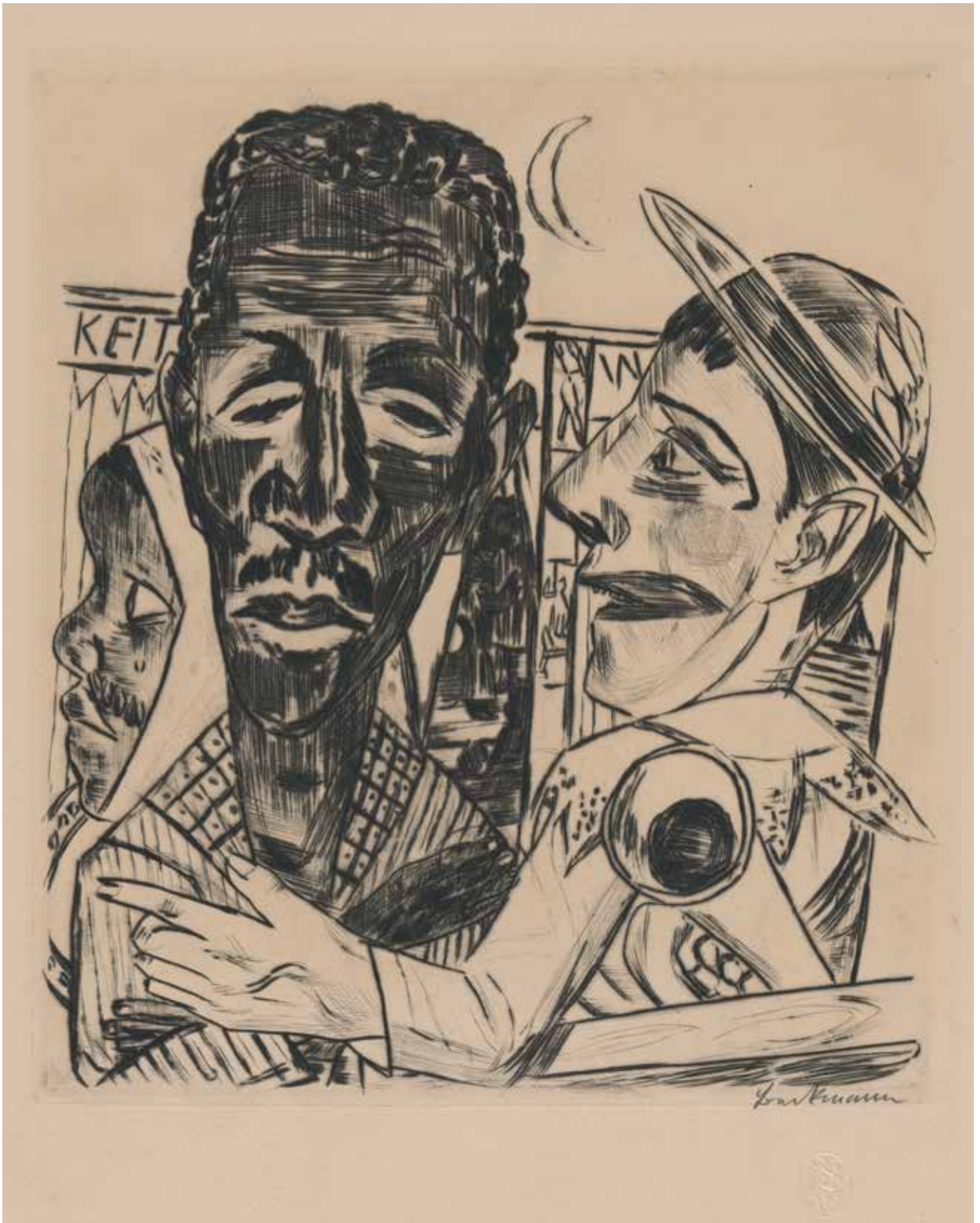
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traveled. Exhibiting Africans in huts and displaying their lifestyles at an event that celebrated the newest innovations and achievements in science, culture, and technology made the contrast even greater. The physiognomic variances between the Africans on display and the European viewing public were emphasized, as well as the perceived inferiority of African culture.

Businessmen such as Carl Hagenbeck capitalized upon the demand for what the Germans called *Völkerschauen* (people shows). Originally an animal trader, Hagenbeck established a thriving business in Hamburg in the 1860s, providing wild animals for zoos, circuses, and private collections throughout Europe. In 1874, at a time when ethnographic displays of people from far-flung locales were gaining popularity, Hagenbeck expanded his business to include the procurement of individuals from countries and regions including Egypt, Somalia, Sri Lanka, India, Siberia, Mongolia, North America, Chile, Cameroon, and Australia for inclusion in exhibitions presented at carnivals, world's fairs, zoos, and circuses.

Hagenbeck not only secured animals and human performers for other organizations, but he formed his own traveling circus, which grew out of his experiences in importing foreigners for ethnographic exhibitions. Hilke Thode-Arora observes that the circus impresario had several criteria when selecting an ethnic group for a show: “the group must be strange in some way; it must have particular physical characteristics; and it must have picturesque customs.”⁷ In essence, the more “exotic” a particular culture was to European eyes, the greater appeal it held. As the renown of these shows grew, Hagenbeck took them on tour, beginning in Germany and expanding to other countries within Europe. By the mid-1880s, Hagenbeck's *Völkerschau* had grown from a small single show in his backyard in Hamburg to multiple large-scale productions that toured the major European capitals and drew hundreds of thousands of visitors. This increase in demand and audience size was not unique. What began as piecemeal displays at the beginning of the nineteenth century were widespread by 1921, when Beckmann began making prints for the *Jahrmarkt* portfolio. Ethnographic exhibitions were being produced throughout Europe and North America, appearing in circuses, carnivals, world's fairs, and zoological gardens.⁸



Beckmann executed two states of several prints in the portfolio, meaning that he printed a certain number of impressions and then returned to the matrix—in this instance, a copper plate—and made alterations to the composition. The RISD Museum owns the second state of the portfolio, and Beckmann made significant alterations to the composition of *The Negro* between the first and second state. He further accentuated the circles of makeup on the clown's cheeks and embellished both the clothing of the clown and of the African figure facing the picture plane. The most dramatic changes made to the print, however, are the enhancements that add context to the figures' surroundings.

The additions Beckmann made to the adjoining attraction's tent clarify and enhance the environment and the atmosphere that surrounds the African figures and the clown. Behind the clown's nose, a vertical strip with a few images runs along the length of the tent's opening, ostensibly advertising the attraction inside. Although the images are difficult to make out, they appear figural, perhaps alluding to a sideshow act featuring contortionism, or sword-swallowing, or an individual with a genetic anomaly, such as dwarfism. These images, although ambiguous, may provide clues as to the other addition to the tent. Visible in the upper left portion of the composition, part of the sign advertising the attraction inside reads -KEIT, the German suffix meaning “-ness,” which is added to adjectives and participles to form abstract nouns. Although an infinite number of possibilities exist for the word on the side of the tent, *abartigkeit* (abnormality), *abscheulichkeit* (hideousness), or *merkwürdigkeit* (strangeness) are all plausible solutions. Regardless of which word is on the side of the tent, its addition to the print enhances the spectacular nature of the scene—nestled between a horn-toting clown and a tent with a large sign boldly advertising the wonders inside, the two African figures stand in an enclosure, one attraction within the crowded, chaotic fray of the circus.

The ethnographic exhibition and the circus sideshow, both of which placed human “curiosities” on display, were frequently presented together in a juxtaposition that can be traced back to the annual fair. Many scientists believed race and anatomical deformity were connected, thus the placement of different racial types adjacent to medical anomalies seemed logical.⁹ John Phillip Short observes that “[p]opular ‘anthropological’ works, usually in the form of travelogues, often presented primitive Africans in popular-Darwinist terms as the ‘missing link’—as examples of evolutionary atavism—reproducing a theme common to the freak show.”¹⁰ Certainly for the ordinary spectator, the combination of genetic abnormalities, self-made human oddities

(the tattooed human, the snake charmer, the sword swallower), and “exotic” foreigners held a sort of appeal for their strangeness and “otherness.” The presentation of the ethnographic exhibition within the sideshow had enormous popular and thus commercial appeal, and this practice continued well into the twentieth century.

While *The Negro* makes reference to the practice of displaying foreigners in ethnographic exhibitions, it also bears a number of compositional similarities to a lithograph that Beckmann printed a few years earlier, entitled *The Way Home* (Der Nachhauseweg), the first print in the *Hell* portfolio, published in 1919. *The Way Home* [Fig. 4] shows Beckmann and a disfigured military veteran in the foreground. Like the clown in *The Negro*, Beckmann stands to the right, his arm thrust forward in a similar gesture, but in this instance, he clutches the stump of a veteran's amputated arm. In both instances, the clown's and Beckmann's outstretched arms block the viewer's access but also function as a framing device, calling attention to the figure, essentially presenting the disabled veteran and the African performer. Beckmann, as well as other artists in Germany after World War I, such as Otto Dix and George Grosz, depicted wounded soldiers as figures outside of the norm, with disfigured faces and missing limbs. Presented as impoverished, pitiful figures, their altered bodies made them the subject of morbid fascination, visual reminders of the horrors of the war and the subsequent political conflict and economic chaos of the Weimar Republic.¹¹ The similarities between the

two groups—disabled veterans and ethnographic performers—and the ways in which Beckmann portrays them, render them a similar type of “other”: a figure to gawk at who also elicits feelings of curiosity, pity, and in some instances, patriotism.



4

FIG. 4

Beckmann, Max
German, 1884–1950
The Way Home
Plate 2 from the portfolio *Hell*
(Die Hölle), 1919
Lithograph

Sheet: 87 × 61 cm. (34 1/4 × 24 in.)

Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund (468.1949)

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, U.S.A

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The second print in *Jahrmarkt* to feature African performers is *Negro Dance* [Fig. 5], which shows a group of African dancers and musicians on a stage with spectators at their feet. Three performers play rudimentary musical instruments: on the right is a seated figure with a stringed instrument, a figure in the center holds two cylindrical objects aloft, and a figure to the left grasps the handles of two cymbal-like instruments. A fourth figure stands on stage on the far left, his mouth open as though singing as he holds a spear and shield. A dancer stands out from the group: dressed in a close-fitting shirt and pants that accentuate her hourglass figure, veiled in gauzy, polka-dotted fabric, she simultaneously suggests modesty, mystery, and exoticism.

Although the creators of ethnographic exhibitions asserted that they made visitors privy to the everyday activities of the exhibition participants, these shows were highly staged, often in the form of a narrative with an opening scene, followed by an act of conflict, such as an abduction or an attack on the village. Such events usually precipitated a battle, with a joyful coda—a peace treaty or a marriage—providing an occasion for singing and dancing.¹² Undoubtedly, these were scripted spectacles, despite their appearance of genuineness.¹³ Although some individuals were recruited as novices, others had worked on shows over a long period of time. Eric Ames notes that in Hagenbeck's case, "[t]rained performers such as acrobats, snake charmers, and elephant drivers had often been recruited for [his] troupes," thus populating some of his shows with seasoned performers.¹⁴ Additionally, it was common for the groups to sign contracts with their employers, including stipulations as to how often and under what conditions they were to perform, their salaries, the types of props they were to wear and carry, and their medical coverage.¹⁵ "By the early 1910s," observes Ames, "the process of collecting foreign peoples had indeed become a form of casting, with recruiters looking not for 'anthropological types,' but for actors to fill scripted roles that would literally be assigned to them."¹⁶ As troupes moved from city to city, they were sometimes asked to "perform" as another culture in a different venue, so that the same group of individuals could be billed, for example, as from Dahomey during a performance in Berlin and from Somalia at a show in Paris.¹⁷

FIG. 5

Max Beckmann

German, 1884–1950

*Negro Dance*From the portfolio *Annual Fair (Jahrmarkt)*, 1922

Etching and drypoint on paper

Sheet: 53 × 38.1 cm. (20 7/8 × 15 in.)

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Despite the clearly orchestrated performance that masqueraded as the inhabitants' "everyday life," most viewers were sufficiently persuaded by the authenticity of the shows, and that of its participants, architecture, costumes, and ethnographic objects.

The dance being performed in Beckmann's image was most likely part of the ethnographic exhibition. The stage upon which the performers stand is certainly indicative of this, and the incongruousness of the dancer with her fellow performers is a clear sign of the artificiality of the scene. The dancer wears a sheer veil over a form-fitting ensemble and her skin is lighter than that of the other performers, suggesting that she is perhaps of Middle Eastern or North African descent, performing the type of veiled "harem dance" frequently depicted in French Orientalist

FIG. 6

Max Beckmann
 German, 1884–1950
Negro Dance (detail)
 From the portfolio *Annual Fair* (*Jahrmarkt*), 1922
 Etching and drypoint on paper
 Sheet: 53 × 38.1 cm. (20 7/8 × 15 in.)
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paintings of the nineteenth century, while the other figures appear to be generalized representations of sub-Saharan Africans. This sort of cultural “bricolage,” in which a variety of exoticized cultural material is brought together with no regard for the differences within it, emphasizes the extent to which many of these exhibitions were inauthentic.¹⁸ The mere suggestion of “otherness” was sufficiently accurate to entertain audiences with little knowledge of cultures outside of their own, and who had no way of knowing they were being fooled.

In his depiction of the circus, Beckmann does not render any of the acts traditionally associated with its glamorous side, such as trick riding or trapeze stunts. Instead, among the six images that depict real acts, four of them belong to the sideshow, implying perhaps that the artist found greater interest in those who existed on the fringes of society. Although the viewer is given a view behind the scenes—Beckmann peels back the metaphorical curtain and allows the audience to see the artificiality at work—it is always at a safe distance. The barker, the shooting-gallery proprietress, the African performer, and the snake charmer all confront the viewer right up at the picture plane, although in each instance a barrier impedes any interaction, creating a clear separation between spectacle and spectator. In other instances, Beckmann depicts the other activities of the circus—the backstage area, the carousel, the tall man, and the African dance—as physically distant from the viewer.

The circus is a space of memory and nostalgia, an escape from the everyday world, yet Beckmann presents it as a place of chaos, duplicity, stoic confrontation, and impenetrability, perhaps mirroring the chaos of the Weimar Republic. *The Negro* and *Negro Dance* may be reminders of the legacy of German imperial rule while also hinting at the displays of “otherness” disabled war veterans were subjected to in contemporary German society. Rather than *Jahrmarkt* functioning solely as a portfolio that chronicles the ups and downs of Beckmann’s marriage and the intricacies of his relationship with his wife, the portfolio is both deeply personal and a broader examination of role-playing, artificiality, and the performance of identity in postwar Germany.

Many thanks to Jan Howard, Emily Peters, and Amy Pickworth for their insightful comments on this essay.

- 1 Rose-Carol Washton Long, "Ambivalence: Personal and Political," in *Of Truths Impossible to Put in Words: Max Beckmann Contextualized*, edited by Rose-Carol Washton Long and Maria Makela (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2008), 117. Washton Long also identifies Beckmann in the audience of *The Tall Man* and riding the boat in *Merry-Go-Round*. Other scholars view the portfolio as a part of Beckmann's long-term investigation into the theater, fair, and circus as a metaphor for life in postwar Germany. These readings of *Jahrmarkt* are not incorrect, but they overlook the nuances of the various images in the portfolio. See Hans Belting, *Max Beckmann: Tradition as Problem in Modern Art* (New York: Timken Publishers, Inc., 1989). Jo-Anne Bernie Danzker and Amélie Ziersch, eds. *Max Beckmann, Welt-Theater: Das graphische Werk 1901–1946* (Stuttgart: Hatje, 1993), and Cornelia Homburg, "Circus Beckmann," in *Max Beckmann—A Dream of Life*, edited by Tilman Osterwold (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2006).
- 2 Washton Long, 121. The other two prints in the portfolio that do not depict Beckmann or his wife are *Dressing Room* and *Snake Lady*, although Washton Long contends that the figure leaving the tent in *Snake Lady* resembles Beckmann's body type.
- 3 Formerly known as Cirque Fernando, which both Edgar Degas and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec depicted in circus-related canvases painted in the 1870s and 1880s.
- 4 Cornelia Homburg, "Circus Beckmann," in *Max Beckmann—A Dream of Life*, edited by Tilman Osterwold (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2006), 35.
- 5 Raymond Corbey, "Ethnographic Showcases, 1870–1930," *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Aug. 1993): 344.
- 6 Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, Gilles Boëtsch, Éric Deroo, and Sandrine Lemaire, "Human Zoos: The Greatest Exotic Shows in the West," in *Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Colonial Empires*, edited by Pascal Blanchard, et al. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 4. The ethnographic exhibition, which reached the height of its popularity during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, has origins in both ancient Egypt and in the Renaissance cabinet of curiosities, or *Wunderkammer*. Cabinets of curiosities arose in mid-sixteenth-century Europe as repositories for all manner of wondrous and exotic objects. These collections assembled a wide array of specimens collected from all over the world, ranging from paintings and sculptures to the decorative arts, including clocks, globes, and music boxes, to naturalia, such as coral, seashells, plants, taxidermy, and skeletons. Marking the intersection of science and superstition, the cabinet of curiosities functioned as a space in which scholars and scientists could conduct empirical study as a way to further understand the world in which we live. As scientists and scholars moved beyond flora and fauna to document, categorize, and classify the various races and ethnicities of humankind, the demand for displays of foreign individuals increased.
- 7 Hilke Thode-Arora, "Hagenbeck's European Tours," in *Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Colonial Empires*, edited by Pascal Blanchard, et al. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 167. Eric Ames believes that these guidelines were never explicitly stated, but implied in Hagenbeck's correspondence with his agents. See Eric Ames, *Carl Hagenbeck's Empire of Entertainments* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 41–42.
- 8 Pascal Blanchard, et al., indicate that the only way to chart the growth of the ethnographic exhibition is through the profits that people made: "Such quantifiable information underlines the popularity of these shows, including those in small towns, and the financial benefits they brought to their promoters are obvious. It tells us that profits rose steadily until the beginning of the First World War, and that the growing number of troupes and universal or international exhibitions from the 1880s generated a tenfold increase in the opportunities for the public to see the 'exotics,'" in *Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Colonial Empires*, edited by Pascal Blanchard, et al. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 12.
- 9 John Phillip Short, "Carnival Knowledge: Enlightenment and Distraction in the Cultural Field," in *Magic Lantern Empire: Colonialism and Society in Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 90–95.
- 10 Ibid., 95.
- 11 For more on this topic, see Carol Poore, *Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), especially chapter 1.
- 12 Hilke Thode-Arora, "Hagenbeck's European Tours," in *Human Zoos*, 170.
- 13 Blanchard, et al., "The Greatest Exotic Shows in the West," in *Human Zoos*, 20.
- 14 Ames, *Carl Hagenbeck's Empire of Entertainments*, 47.
- 15 Ibid., 50.
- 16 Ibid., 51. Some of the individuals who were recruited for these shows were domestic workers who were already living in Europe, and one group arrived in Hamburg wearing European clothing, much to Hagenbeck's dismay. Ibid., 53–54.
- 17 Blanchard, et al., "The Greatest Exotic Shows in the West," 33.
- 18 Abigail Solomon-Godeau labels Gauguin's borrowing of motifs from various cultures "bricolage," describing the artist's primitivism as an invention culled together from an array of sources. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Going Native: Paul Gauguin and the Invention of Primitivist Modernism," in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Icon Books, 1992), 328.

Portfolio

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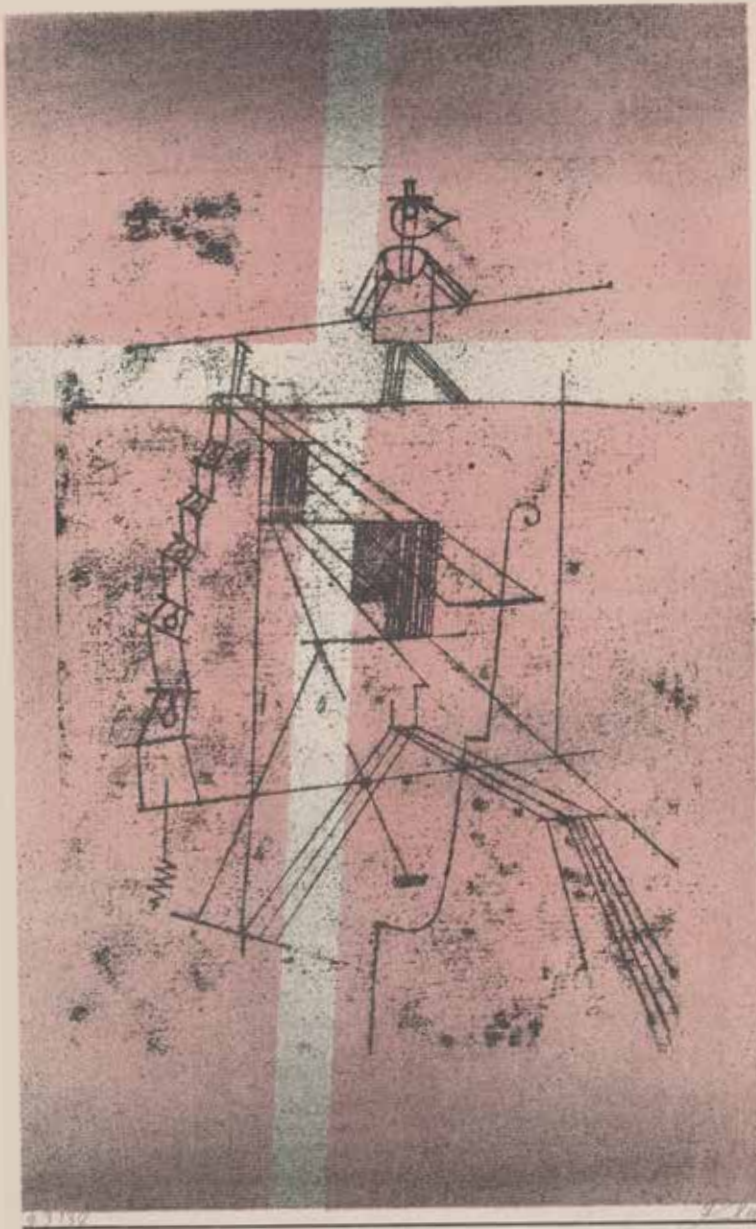
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objects are identified on page 60















Lines of Fate

Tissot's *Ces Dames des chars*

Michelle Clayton

Three female charioteers glide towards and past us. The first, redheaded, unmoved by her surroundings, stares ahead, crop at the ready. The second, brunette, looks through us impassively, charging forward, gripping her reins. The third, a blonde with less distinct features, is in a state of reverie, eyes half-closed. With their mythological costumes and air of inexorable movement, these figures exist at an oblique angle to us. They are the subject of our gaze, indeed subjected to hundreds or thousands of gazes magnetized around them, but they pass by with no regard for their onlookers. Static yet moving images, they glide past in serene disdain.

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FIG. 1

James Jacques Joseph Tissot

French, 1836–1902

Ladies of the Chariots (*Ces Dames des chars*) (detail), 1883–1885

Oil on canvas

146.1 × 100.7 cm. (57 ½ × 39 ¾ in.)

Gift of Mr. Walter Lowry 58.186

We find ourselves in Paris at the Hippodrome de l'Alma, site of lavish equestrian and circus performances, lyric dramas, and variety shows. Inaugurated in 1877 and operational until 1892, the Hippodrome could accommodate several thousand spectators around its enormous oval track.¹ A stunning example of ferrovitreous architecture, it allowed in natural light through a partly retractable glass ceiling, but its interior was also peppered with gas globes, gleaming from numerous columns and beams. All of this light made it an enticing space to see and be seen: to watch spectacles and spectators, whether from the circuit provided for promenading around the arena or the seated terrace encircling the venue.

Spectacle, spectatorship, and moving angles are everywhere at play in this large canvas [Fig. 2] by the French painter James Tissot (1836–1902). Born Jacques-Joseph Tissot, he anglicized his name as a young art student in Paris, where he mingled with emerging artists such as Degas, Whistler, and Manet, not to mention many prominent realist writers of his day, and enjoyed notable commercial success for his portraits of society men and women in their spaces of leisure.² Throughout his career he would resist the call of the emerging Impressionist aesthetic, remaining attentive instead to crispness of detail and clarity of sense. We note this especially in *Ladies of the Chariots*, which pays careful attention to details of space, costume, and audience, studiously avoiding any attempt to render movement, cleaving to sharpness where others might have deployed a blur. John Ruskin famously dismissed Tissot's portraits as “mere colored photographs of vulgar society,”³ taking twin aim at their mimetic style and avowedly modern content, but it is striking that Tissot, even in a painting concerned with movement, should have chosen to sidestep photography's contemporaneous experiments with capturing motion, hewing instead to something more timeless, serene, and static.

FIG. 2

James Jacques Joseph Tissot
 French, 1836–1902
Ladies of the Chariots (Ces Dames des chars),
 1883–1885
 Oil on canvas
 146.1 × 100.7 cm. (57 ½ × 39 ¾ in.)
 Gift of Mr. Walter Lowry 58.186



Ladies of the Chariots belongs to a series of canvasses painted after Tissot's return from a twelve-year stay in London (from 1871 to 1883). Throwing himself back into the Parisian cultural scene with great gusto and, in particular, into its spaces of popular entertainment and consumption—shops, parks, restaurants, nightlife—he produced fifteen large canvasses, exhibited in Paris in 1885 under the title *Quinze tableaux sur la femme à Paris*, and shown a year later in London under the title *Pictures of Parisian Life*.⁴ Notwithstanding the erasure at work in the English title—perhaps meant to downplay any suggestion of a gendered voyeurism—the series depicts the activities of specific female types in late nineteenth-century Paris, from shopgirls and circus performers to society ladies and social climbers. Voyeurism is at once showcased and upended by these canvasses, which foreground the act of gazing upon these female figures but also emphasize their ability to return the gaze, often in quite startling ways. In *The Shop Girl* (*La Demoiselle de magasin*, in the collection of the Art Gallery of Toronto), for instance, while one smiling shopgirl opens a door for the viewer, a second boldly returns the gaze of a window-shopper drawn less by her wares than by her figure. (Tissot craftily positions the lecher behind a mannequin, grafting his head onto a truncated female body, placing his own grotesque figure up for grabs.)

This interplay between, and potential reversibility of, spectacle and spectator across distinctly gendered lines was already a recurrent feature of Tissot's earlier canvasses.⁵ From his first avowedly modern painting, *Mlle L. L.* (1864, Musée d'Orsay), Tissot's female subjects show an unnerving tendency to look directly at their viewer, often with a smile of amusement or light disdain, or even, to the viewer's discomfort, a hint of boredom or skepticism. In the 1874 painting *London Visitors* (Milwaukee Art Museum), a woman escorted by a male companion looks away from a shared guidebook to lock eyes with a likely male onlooker, her enigmatically raised umbrella foreshadowing the angled riding crop of *Ladies of the Chariots*. (A further enigma is introduced in

FIG. 3

James Jacques Joseph Tissot
French, 1836–1902

Women of Paris: The Circus Lover, 1885

Oil on canvas

147.3 × 101.6 cm. (58 × 40 in.)

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Juliana Cheney Edwards Collection 58.45

Photograph © 2014 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



the ownerless cigar teetering on a lower step.) This impudent and—by Victorian standards—improper tendency to look back is intensified in the series *La Femme à Paris*. In *The Artist's Ladies* (*Les Femmes d'artiste*), for instance, one of two women dining with an older male artist in a packed outdoor terrace swivels around to regard us with curiosity, suggesting that the viewer is being discussed, perhaps even mocked, within the painting. The interplay of gazes is multiplied and made more enigmatic still in *The Circus Lover* (*Les Femmes de sport*) [Fig. 3], which depicts an “amateur circus” comprised of male aristocrats posing on trapezes for the delectation of high society ladies. In this mesmerizing work, the

gaze of one woman in the foreground turns away from the spectacle and fixes on the viewer, to the apparent consternation of a clown in the ring, clamoring for her attention.

Ladies of the Chariots also fixes on a circus, albeit one on a much larger scale, and it uses this enlarged scale to play up certain tensions and contradictions. We find ourselves closer to the main performers, in a more intimate relation to the central event, but at the same time pushed away from it by the sense that we are only one among thousands. Meanwhile the space within which the spectacle unfolds is at once carefully compartmentalized—by lines of architecture, curves of glass and circuit—and worked by the painter into perceptual disarray: segmented glass panes and iron fretwork mirror and contain the sea of crowded faces, looking at and past and through one another to the spectacle before them. If we peer closely, we see that the gazes patterning the audience roam in divergent directions, picking up on different parts of the spectacle before them. The spectacle itself is lit by gas globes placed at regular intervals on columns around the circuit, but the painting's odd perspective cuts the globes loose from their perceptual moorings: they appear in irregular clusters, at unpredictable drops, in varying sizes.⁶ In the face of this visual confusion, we light on what we can, only to find ourselves further disoriented. The lead charioteer's diagonally poised crop, for instance, cuts in a different direction to the dominant lines of the architecture, while the intersecting bands of the horses' yokes offer an apposite image of entanglement.

Apposite, because the viewer's sightlines are nothing if not entangled. The painting's main characters—three imposing charioteers, depicted as they round a corner in sequence—are not, in fact, located where our gaze first takes them to be. The blonde charioteer, for instance, initially appears alongside the brunette rather than after her, and at an unsettlingly oblique angle. More strangely, at first glance she seems to be mounted on the chestnut horse tilting its head at us, until we notice the white horse to its side. We try to adjust our gaze to place her on the white horse, only to realize that she is not in fact riding a horse but driving a cart, itself pulled by two horses. Horses now begin to multiply, as much in our field of vision as in the mind's eye: we notice a second chestnut in the pair, its right half visible and about to enter the picture completely, which leads us to realize that the leading charioteer's horse—partly cropped out of view as it leaves our line of vision—must in turn have a counterpart. At this point we start to wonder just how many human and animal bodies

actually make up the procession: whether this really involves only a trio or if there are figures further ahead of our incomplete view of the spectacle. And indeed we are being given a remarkably cropped view of the Hippodrome, a narrow slice of the vast circuit, making the airy venue feel strangely cramped, an impression ramped up by how the internal posts keeping the chariots' course in check jut into the picture.

The most striking and unsettling element in the painting, however, has to do with our own position as viewers. We gaze upon these figures, their vehicles, and their multitudinous spectators not from the careful distance of the terraces, nor from the intermingled space of the promenade, but from a near-impossible vantage point: inside the arena itself. And indeed our viewing position is extremely precarious: we are about to be trampled by an approaching pair of horses that seem directly to be questioning our place or the wisdom of our placement.⁷ We are caught off our guard in the crossfire of intersecting gazes and onrushing bodies. Tissot makes his viewer come alive at the moment of direct imperilment.

We might ask ourselves, *Why does Tissot choose this particular space, this particular spectacle?* The circus was one of many spaces for popular entertainment in the late nineteenth century, a multi-leveled arena for the performance of contemporary life, offering various angles on the interplay between and amongst performers and spectators.⁸ But it specifically allowed Tissot to play with merging the mythical and the modern, along the lines envisioned by Charles Baudelaire in his enormously influential 1859 essay "The Painter of Modern Life," which famously called for excavations of the timeless in the transitory.⁹ Tissot's interest here, however, is in the ways that modernity deploys the mythological, coiling itself around it, using past forms as a kind of armature around which to weave the present. The circus, after all, was patterned on a historical precedent, the Roman arena, and in the nineteenth century, battle reenactments constituted some of its most popular and lavish spectacles. Tissot's painting also makes us feel the relation between past and present on a perceptual, even tactile level, in the carefully rendered circus costumes: the intricate chainmail effect of the bodice and the patterned bustier, both softened by opulent corsages of flowers that wend their way around the charioteers' spiky crowns.¹⁰

But Tissot, I would suggest, has a further purpose, one ultimately more Baroque than contemporary, sliding toward the allegorical. What is it we are looking at, as spectators inside or outside the painting,

inside or outside the ring? Many of the paintings from this series have a narrative dimension, presenting a segment of a story whose past and future we are invited to supply. As Wentworth has anatomized, the idea of hidden stories was central to the production and also to the envisioned reproduction of the series: Tissot's plan, playing off his multiple connections across the Parisian cultural scene, was to make the paintings available as etchings accompanied by stories commissioned from the most famous writers of the day, such as Guy de Maupassant, Émile Zola, and others.¹¹ The idea never came to fruition; only a handful of stories, published separately, have been uncovered, and the story by Théodore de Banville which was to accompany *Ladies of the Chariots* is not among them. This lack of a story or an anecdote in some ways seems fitting for this painting, which in place of an individual story—an inquiry into the lives of its subjects at a singular moment of unfolding—presents us with a slice of space peopled by multiple figures, through which a circular performance repeats itself, featuring moving but unmoved performers whose inner lives seem quite beside the point, and who seem entirely indifferent to anyone else's.

There is, however, a tantalizing reference to the Hippodrome de l'Alma in *Sappho: A Picture of Paris Life* (Sappho: mœurs parisiens), an 1884 novel by Tissot's close friend Alphonse Daudet, which sheds further light on what is being played out in this painting.¹² At a lunch in the country hosted by a former female charioteer, the two central characters rub shoulders with three aging Hippodrome performers, referred to, in what might seem a throwaway insult, as *des vieilles parques*. English translations of the novel have rendered this alternately as “hags” and “witches.” But the noun itself has a very specific referent that makes these aging women older still, if not, indeed, timeless: the Parcae, the Roman figures of fate, with their impassive, inexorable effect on the lives through which they cut.¹³ Once we catch this reference, we start to suspect that the aim of *Ladies of the Chariots* is less to show us particular performers with imaginable backstories than to present universal figures of fate, layering the untimely and the allegorical in the everyday.

The three charioteers of Tissot's canvas portray these classical figures in vividly detailed ways. Decima, here redheaded in the foreground, measures the thread of life, referenced through her riding crop. That thread is spun out by Nona, distinguished here as brunette, holding entangled reins. It is finally severed by Morta, depicted with great conceptual wit by Tissot, who hides the blonde charioteer's reins from our sight.

Presenting these emblems of past, present, and future on the same representational plane, Tissot extracts an existential vision from the everyday, using a circus spectacle to offer a Baroque telescoping of the passage of life by which we are about to be trampled. It is some small comfort, as destiny bears down upon us, that the tilted head of a chestnut horse should offer us something approaching empathy.

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My thanks to Stuart Burrows, Alison Chang, Daniel Harkett, Amy Pickworth, Thangam Ravindranathan, and Tanya Sheehan for very helpful comments before and during the writing of this essay.

1 Descriptions of the Hippodrome are drawn from John McCormick, *Popular Theatres of Nineteenth-Century France* (Routledge, 1993), especially 32–33; and Demar Irvine, *Massenet: A Chronicle of His Life and Times* (Hal Leonard Corporation, 1997), 108.

2 My account draws on various studies of Tissot's career, particularly Michael Wentworth, *James Tissot* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), and Nancy Rose Marshall and Malcolm Warner, *James Tissot: Victorian Life/Modern Love* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999). For full-color reproductions of many of Tissot's paintings, see Russell Ash, *James Tissot* (New York: Abrams, 1992).

3 See Nancy Rose Marshall, "James Tissot's 'Colored Photographs of Vulgar Society,'" in Susan David Bernstein and Elsie B. Michie, eds., *Victorian Vulgar: Taste in Verbal and Visual Culture* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 201–222.

4 Wentworth offers insightful readings of each painting in the series, with an appendix listing the slightly different order in the French and English exhibitions. French audiences complained that Tissot, contaminated by his years abroad, had produced an Englishman's view of Parisian women, or even more distastefully, was repopulating the streets of Paris with Englishwomen.

5 See Marshall and Warner, especially 44–51.

6 Wentworth refers to the "violent perspective" and "neurotic intensity" of many paintings in this series, finding these technical questions more compelling than the narrative aspects of the canvasses which have tended to be the focus of previous readings (165–68). My own reading aims to combine the technical with the thematic to find a reason for the unsettling sense of *Ladies of the Chariots*.

7 The viewer's sense of connection to the horse in this painting is not unlike the connection established in the extraordinary long take which opens Béla Tarr's 2011 film *The Turin Horse*.



8 For thoughts on the circus as conceptual laboratory for aesthetic autonomy, see Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis*, trans. Zakir Paul (London: Verso, 2013), 75–91.

9 Warner and Marshall dwell on Baudelaire's importance for Tissot, arguing ultimately for the latter's attempt in response to create "specifically modern allegories." See 35, 121.

10 The crown inevitably reminds the viewer of the Statue of Liberty, and this is not an idle connection: as part of attempts to raise funds to complete the statue, the head was exhibited at the 1878 World's Fair in Paris. The completed statue was not shipped to the United States until 1885, the year of Tissot's Paris exhibition.

11 See Wentworth, 160–73.

12 Published in Paris by G. Charpentier et cie. in 1884, the novel—and specifically its date of composition and subtitle—points to acutely shared interests between Tissot and Daudet.

13 I am referring to the unattributed 1888 translation, published in London by Vizetelly and Co., and to the 1899 edition, translated by George Burnham Ives (Boston: Little, Brown & Co.). Eithne Wilkins's 1954 translation for London's Folio Society more accurately renders *des vieilles parques* as "the Fatal Sisters."

How To

Uncharacteristically, Matisse provided interpretive notes for the prints in his 1947 *Jazz* portfolio. Explaining *The Nightmare of the White Elephant*, he said:

The white elephant (white is the symbol of animals that are victims of taming, captivity) is performing its act standing on a ball, under the dazzling circus lights, while memories of his native black forest (black is primitive and powerful) assail him like red tongues of fire, with all the violence of arrows.

Matisse's dark narrative conflicts with the gaiety of a brightly colored circus scene, and yet the details support it: the "red tongues" of memory energize the animal's balancing act, for example, but they confine the

beast as well. This elephant stands as a metaphor for the artist; in the credo-like accompanying text for *Jazz*, Matisse made an impassioned case for an artist's freedom from cages of any kind: "An artist should never be a prisoner of himself, prisoner of style, prisoner of reputation, prisoner of success, etc."

Neither should the artist be prisoner to any one medium. Although primarily a painter, Matisse's turn to cut-outs opened new possibilities for his art and allowed him to improvise with abstract forms, no longer dependent upon their models. The white

elephant, for example, summarizes a more recognizable anatomy from a 1943 sketch. With a few motions of the scissors, Matisse carved out a series of open-ended signs that constituted the radically reduced language of his late work. What remained of the object—elephant, circus





Henri Matisse
French, 1869–1954
Circus Scene, 1943
Drawing for the illustrated book *Jazz*,
1947
Pencil on paper
27.9 × 38.1 cm. (11 × 15 in.)
Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundation

Henri Matisse
French, 1869–1954
The Nightmare of the White Elephant
(*Le Cauchemar de l'éléphant blanc*),
1947
From the artist's book *Jazz*
Color pochoir on paper
Sheet: 42.2 × 65.4 cm. (16 5/8 × 25 7/8 in.)
Mary B. Jackson Fund 1987.058

All works of H. Matisse:
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lights, forest, etc.—was the sign that for Matisse existed “in its own right and in the composition for which I designed it.”

Creating those signs was just the first step in the cut-out process. After cutting shapes from heavy paper brushed with Linel gouache, Matisse tacked them to his studio walls, where shifting light and currents of air acted on them. He then began organizing them into larger compositions. To make print versions of the final maquettes for *Jazz*, Matisse chose the *pochoir* process, which required making stencils from thin sheets of metal, hand-cut in the precise form of the original cut-outs. Pochoir allowed Matisse to use the same Linel gouaches as in the cut-outs. The saturated colors were applied with brushes through the stencils, producing painted edges softer than the crisp edges in cut paper.

Matisse was initially disappointed by this and other subtle differences from the original cut-outs. As meticulous as he had been in overseeing the process, he privately lamented that the flattening of the colors and loss of textured layers gave the plates a “puzzle-like character.” But *Jazz* proved to be a pivotal work, because it encouraged Matisse to create almost exclusively in cut-outs for the remainder of his career. Using them, he felt he had achieved a fundamental artistic goal: the synthesis of line and color:

“The paper cut-outs enable me to draw in color.... Instead of drawing the contour and filling it in with color—one modifying the other—I draw directly into the color.... It is not a departure, but a culmination.”

Ellen McBreen

Portfolio

(1)

Etruscan

Acrobat (probably the handle of a cista lid), 4th century BCE–3rd century BCE

Bronze

8.3 × 3.5 cm. (3 5/16 × 1 3/8 in.)

Gift of Mrs. Celia Robinson Stillwell 85.107.1

(2)

Alexander Calder

American, 1898–1976

Tumblers with Spectators, 1931–1932

Ink and crayon on paper

48.6 × 63.3 cm. (19 1/8 × 24 7/8 in.)

The Albert Pilavin Memorial Collection of 20th Century American Art:

gift of Mr. and Mrs. Irving J. Fain 69.205

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(3)

Associated American Artists and Riverdale Fabrics, manufacturers

Jacqueline Groag, designer

English (b. Czechoslovakia), 1903–1986

Puppet Ballet, 1953

Cotton plain weave, screenprinted

229.9 × 90.2 cm. (90 1/2 × 35 1/2 in.)

Edgar J. Lownes Fund 1998.80.1

(4)

Paul Klee

Swiss, 1879–1940

The Tightrope Walker, 1921

Color lithograph on paper

Plate: 44.1 × 26.8 cm. (17 3/8 × 10 5/8 in.)

Museum Works of Art Fund 44.694

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(5)

Jules Mallet, engraver

French, active early 19th century

Louis Hippolyte Lebas, designer

French, 1782–1867

Oberkampf, manufacturer

France, Jouy-en-Josas, active 1760–1843

The Monuments of the South

(Les Monuments du midi), ca. 1815

Cotton plain weave, engraved roller printed

73 × 95.3 cm. (28 3/4 × 37 1/2 in.)

Mary B. Jackson Fund 29.266

(6)

Jean Charles de Castelbajac

French (b. Morocco), 1949

Teddy Bear Jacket, Autumn/Winter 1988/1989

Stuffed teddy bears

Center back length: 66 cm. (26 in.)

Collection of Gael Mendelsohn 1997.93



